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## S&L Personnel Advice Centre How to write the perfect cover letter!

Often overlooked and sometimes completely ignored, a cover letter is the perfect accompaniment to your CV. The letter (or in this modern world, e-mail) will most likely be read before your CV, and it affords you the chance to express all those things that do not comfortably fit into a CV's often rigid structure. Taken as a whole, a CV and covering letter will portray you in the best possible light. If done properly, your covering letter can make the difference between success and failure.

**Note:** Although the following comments will generally apply to most covering letters, the most important thing to keep in mind regarding this letter is that it must be unique, both to you and to your prospective employers. Most employers these days are used to generic templates and sick to death of mail-merged letters that have been sent to a hundred different places with only the company name changed. In a few cases, people have forgotten even to do this! Suddenly the covering letter goes from the icing on the cake of success to the final nail in the coffin of failure... *Above all, make it personal.*

Step 1: Being that this is a letter, it should start with...

### **...An address**

More specifically, your address (and contact details) in the top right hand corner. After that, start the letter with the name and address of your employer. Try to find out exactly who will be dealing with your application and what their title is. You can do this by checking on the internet, or even ringing the company and asking. **It gives the letter a much more personal touch if it is addressed to a real person rather than a generic sir/madam.**

Although there is no set way to write a covering letter, it is a good idea to try and plan out the structure so that you don't end up repeating yourself in each paragraph and confusing the reader. Although there are more words to play with than with the CV, the watchwords are still the same: ***clarity, intelligence and conciseness***

It is often difficult to know how to open such a letter. Keep it simple, start by telling them exactly what you want. Make sure it is clear what position you are applying for. For example,

*"I am writing to you regarding the 'junior copy writer' placement that was recently advertised, and would be most grateful if you would consider my application for this position"*

### **Why is the job good for me?**

Once you have broken the ice, it is time to make clear to your prospective employer what exactly it is about the job that attracts you. Why do you want the job? Again, the key is to deal in specifics. Although your main motivation may be "for the money" or some such, it is better to try and pick one aspect of the job that particularly appeals to you and explain why. If you are applying to become a writer at a newspaper, and you are interested in travel, then try to marry the two together:

*"I am looking to pursue a career in journalism, and travel writing is one area in which I would be keen to garner experience. It is ideal considering that I am an avid traveller myself and have taken a keen interest in travel literature in my own reading"*

### **Why am I good for the job?**

Now that your reader knows the job is right for you, it's time to move on and show that you are right for the job. Here is the place to address your strengths and qualifications that are directly relevant to the position. If there are specific requirements that are mentioned in the job description, use these terms when describing yourself. You may have touched upon some of this in your CV, but here you have room to elaborate upon them more fully. Try not to repeat too much of your CV though. After all, this is supposed to be read in conjunction with your CV, and a

lot of crossover will come across as sloppy. It is good to frame the strengths and merits that you mention in real life examples. If you are trying to put across that you are good with people, give evidence of this. For example:

*"I feel that I am good at working with a wide range of people. During my time as a waiter at "Scott's Oyster Bar", I dealt with all sorts of people. It was difficult at first because of the hectic pace of the food industry, but I soon learnt to cope with the pressure. I was particularly good at handling people's complaints, listening and talking to them in clear terms, whilst remaining polite at all times."*

You can use your examples to bring in additional skills that may not be directly relevant. Working in things such as IT skills, or your organisational skills is a good idea. Try to offer the reader something unique and beneficial. Use interesting examples that cast you in a separate light to others applying for the position.

### **Closing remarks...**

Finish off by stating clearly when you are available for interview. If there is no set starting date, it is a good idea to make a note of the earliest you can begin working. You should also welcome the prospective employer to contact you if they need any further information. They should have your contact details from the top of the letter, and on your CV. Sign off and, if you are printing the letter out rather than emailing it, sign it for an added level of professionalism.

By approaching the cover letter in a structured manner, you can achieve a clear and concise argument as to why you are best suited to the job. Remember that presentation can reflect strongly or poorly on you. If your letter has no clear sections and rambles on, repeating itself, the reader may consider that you lack the discipline and organisational skills that are so important to most modern workplaces. The covering letter, like the CV informs your prospective employer's first impressions of you.

***Be sure to think about what you want it to say about you.***